

Quilts used in the Underground Railroad

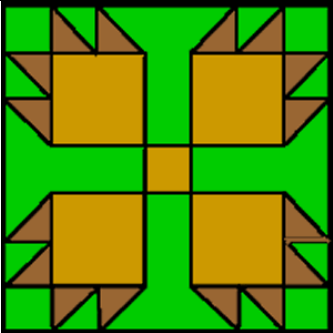
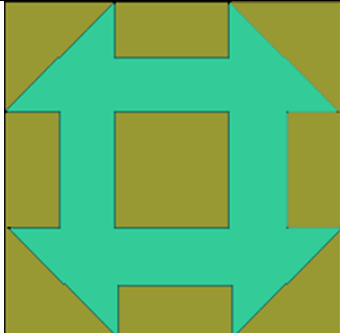
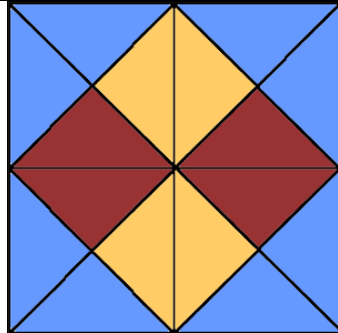
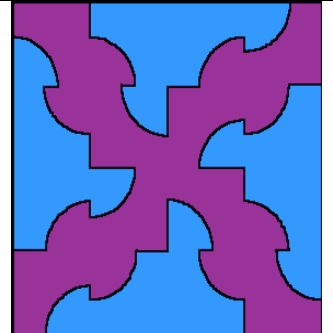
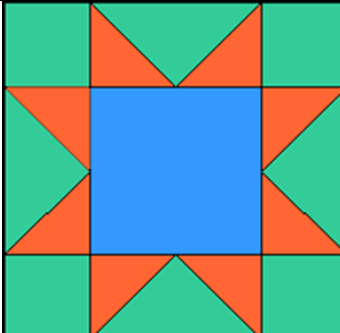
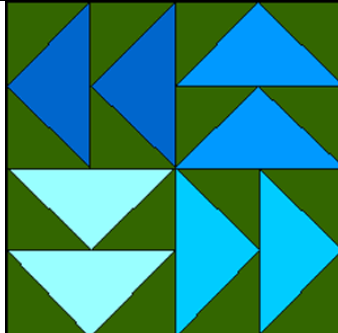
According to a 1987 video titled *Hearts and Hands*, "Quilts were hung on the clotheslines to signal a house was safe for runaway slaves." However, the idea that there was some sort of a "Quilt Code" used during the Underground Railroad has earned its fair share of skepticism due to a lack of available, credible and consistent facts to support it. Regardless, here is what is meant when people refer to the "Under Ground Quilt Code": A system of using quilts to help African-American slaves escape to freedom in the North or Canada during the first half of the 19th century (1800s). The "Quilt Code" is said to have worked in the following ways:

- As a **mnemonic device**- to teach how to escape: each block said something different. Messages are either unhelpful to escape ("when you get free you can marry") insultingly obvious ("head north") or dangerous ("follow bear tracks to shelter and food")
- **Messaging system**- displayed outside like a signal flag, often in strange places (from a cathedral tower at noon when bells rang indicated church was a safe refuge). A claim exists stating that only the conductor could read the message, and then only if he/she knew the "African dialect" could it be used.
- **Map**- an actual map of the escaped route, brought along on the escape. Knots tying the quilt together are claimed either to indicate a measure of time or distance, or latitude/longitude.
- **Award**—given as congratulatory gift to slaves when they crossed the Canadian border.
- **Advice**- messages of advice including the manner of how to act and what to wear on the escaped route North.
- **Well-wishes**- quilts also included well-wishes, and a way to ward off evil spirits for their journey North.

Why Quilts?

- Quilting traces back to Early African Civilization where quilts were weaved instead of stitched and most of the work was done by the men.
- In African, loud colors were often used so that they could be seen from a distance and enemies could be spotted.
- Patterns used could symbolize status, birth, marriages, and geographic locations. These patterns were woven to ward off evil spirits.
- Many slaves quilted blankets left from old flour sacks, feed sacks, worn clothes, rescued curtains, and old coats.
- Slaves quilted blankets for coverlets for their masters.

Examples—Common Quilt Patterns during Underground Railroad:

		
"Bear Claw" - it means follow the path of the bear and it would lead to water	"Shoo Fly" - It is believed that this was a free black that could help slaves escape to freedom	"Bow Tie" - Dress up, wear new clothes, so they you could pass for free blacks living in the North
		
"Drunkard's Path" - Slaves should walk	"Star" - Follow the North Star	"Flying Geese" - fly North in the Spring

in a zig zag path in order to confuse whoever was tracking them		time, so slaves should go North
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Humanities Notes- About the Image Below

Quilt, *Underground Railroad*, 1982, by Oberlin Seniors, Inc. The making of this quilt was a communal effort in the traditional manner by the senior citizens of Oberlin, Ohio. Each member of the group prepared a quilted scene from the history of Oberlin's involvement in the Underground Railroad.

The story that the quilt tells unfolds as the viewer examines the different squares. For example, references are made to the proximity of Ohio, a free state, and to Kentucky, a state where slave keeping flourished. A boat is shown crossing the river that separates these two states, and in another square, a railroad track leads from the South of Ohio. An escaping slave is shown following an arrow marked "Oberlin", which, along with a square showing a map and one exhibiting the North Star, tells the viewer that the town was an organized destination and haven for fugitive slaves. Other squares refer to the philosophy that motivated the town to participate in the Underground Railroad. One explicitly states that the town was founded on the principles of human freedom, and another displays hands of all colors clasped in friendship.

The town of Oberlin is proud of its historic involvement in the Underground Railroad. This effort by the senior citizens glorifies their founding fathers in America's greatest human rights struggle.



Underground Railroad, 1982

Oberlin Seniors, 1982

See Page 249 in textbook for a clearer image.

ASSIGNMENT:

Secret Quilt Message

Imagine that **Team Typhoon** was along the lines of the Underground Railroad. Design a quilt square that will be displayed for other teams and "passengers" to see.

Create a message for the passengers and conductors of the Underground Railroad who may pass through, letting them know they are within the territory of "safe houses".

Use at least one 8.5x11 sheet of paper and design a message, using color and symbolism.

Remember that many slaves could not read or write so most of these messages would need to be portrayed through symbolic visuals instead. Explain the meaning of your message on the backside of your paper.

Your "message" could be one or more of the following:

- **Mnemonic device**
- **Messaging system-**
- **Map**
- **Award**
- **Advice**
- **Well-wishes**

OR

- like the Oberlin Seniors, it could be a **commemoration in memory of** those who were a part of the Underground Railroad. **(In this case, your quilt can contain words.)**